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SUBJECT: IIP SPEAKER DEREK SHEARER ENGAGES SYRIAN AUDIENCES ON U.S.
ELECTIONS

¶1. (U) SUMMARY. IIP speaker and former U.S. Ambassador Derek Shearer engaged diverse sectors of Syrians including university students, human rights, business, and media audiences during his May 26-29 visit. Shearer shared an political insider's view of how the U.S. elections process works and provided various audiences with captivating vignettes about all three candidates, their inner circles, and their key policy positions. Shearer underscored that a new administration would assess its policies vis-`-vis Syria based on Syria's actions now, not on what the SARG might do after the new president was innaugurated. Shearer's briefings were well-received and attracted wide media interest from new venues that exposed even more Syrians to Sheerer's explantion of American democracy and his assessment of the key factors that will likely determine this year's election winner END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) Chevalier Professor of Diplomacy and World Affairs at Senator Barak Obama's alma mater Occidental College in Los Angeles, Derek Shearer also serves as Occidental's Director of Global Affairs. A former U.S. Ambassador to Finland in the Clinton Administration, Shearer ably drew upon his extensive knowledge--as a university professor, former diplomat, and expert in party politics--to explain the U.S. elections process to Syrians.

¶3. (U) For the first time in three years, the Dean of Damascus University's Faculty of Political Sciences agreed to host an ACC speaker in a lecture to more than fifty graduate students and faculty in the Political Science Department of Damascus University, perhaps one of the last bastions of Baathist ideology. Student questions were sophisticated and focused on how a new administration would change U.S. Middle East policy. Shearer skillfully addressed comments regarding U.S. policy bias toward Israel and highlighted a report prepared by his Oxy students, which gave detailed recommendations for the next administration on how best to restore America's image abroad. The report left the Syrian students with a model of pro-active, American-style academic collaboration.

¶4. (SBU) A quiet lunch at the Charge's residence offered a chance for human rights and democracy activists to discuss American politics with Shearer. Many of the activists underscored their support of Bush Administration policies favoring democratic change in the region. Overwhelmingly, the attendees wanted the next president to continue the Bush Administration's strong stance on human rights and democracy in Syria. Shearer was able to put the issues of promoting democracy and human rights into the broader context of campaign politics, which he distinguished from the more complicated arena of Executive-Congressional-Judicial process of governmening after the elections. Participants benifitted from Shearer's insights into long-standing trends favoring democracy promotion, regardless of campaign rhetoric.

¶5. (U) PAS Damascus also used Shearer's visit to shore up relationships with traditional contacts like the Syrian Young Entrepreneurs Association and the Orient Center, Damascus' lone think tank. Inquiries focused on whether a new Democratic administration would favor engagement over isolation of Syria. Calibrating his analysis to these well-informed audiences, Shearer explained the intricacies of policy formation that would likely

impact upon future executive branch decisions regarding relations with Syria. Armed with these insights, some of the participants have since used their positions to recommend positive steps prior to the elections to lay the groundwork for better relations with the next administration.

¶6. (U) MEDIA COVERAGE: Shearer addressed the editorial board at al-Watan, the only semi-independent and privately owned daily in Syria. The on-the-record session was lively and amicable and resulted in front page coverage of the U.S. elections process: "Former U.S. Ambassador Derek Shearer Visits Al-Watan Newspaper: Syrian-Israeli Peace Negotiations Must be Boosted." The article focused on comments Shearer made about the current U.S. Administration supporting Syrian-Israeli peace talks so as to reach a settlement before the expiration of the Bush Administration.

¶8. (U) The "Sada Soria" website published on May 27, 2008, an article about Shearer's lecture at the Syrian Public Relations Association in which he reiterated the importance of public relations in international relations. An interview with private al-Donia TV has not yet been not aired.

¶9. (U) COMMENT. Whether meeting journalists or lecturing in a public venue, Shearer fed and expanded the Syrian interest in the upcoming U.S. election. He exploited opportunities to urge Syrians to highlight positive aspects of the bilateral relationship in the run-up to the election and after. Embassy Damascus will continue to use this interest as a platform to engage Syrians on elections and democracy in a free and open society. END COMMENT.

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